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<CT>The Abolition of God

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Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,

Or what's a heaven for?

Robert Browning, *Andrea del Sarto*

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<A>The Three Impostors

The book's existence had been rumoured for centuries. Finally, in 1680, *Of the Three Great Impostors* appeared in print, issued by an impeccably respectable Lutheran publisher in the city of Kiel. It was a tease, of course. Christian Kortholt, the city's theology professor and the book's author, was not in fact denouncing Moses, Christ and Muhammad, but a newer trio: two Englishmen and a Dutchman. These three impostors were the seventeenth century's equivalent of the twenty-first century's New Atheist 'four horsemen': symbols of a wider shift in the mood, and signs to be spoken against.[1] Between them, they sum up the gathering changes we have been tracing in this book, changes which, by the second half of the seventeenth century, were emerging into the open.

The least-known member of Kortholt's trio is Edward Herbert, baron of Cherbury, whose modern reputation has been eclipsed by his younger brother, the poet George Herbert. The two brothers were close, but could hardly have been more different. The quiet, sickly

[1] Christian Kortholt the elder, *De tribus impostoribus magnis liber* (Kiel: Joachim Reumann, 1680). On the legend of *The three impostors*, see above, pp. XX–XX. The 'four horsemen' label was applied to the like-minded atheists Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens in 2007 in the wake of a much-watched video discussion between them.

George was a famously devoted pastor, firmly but irenically Protestant. Edward was a scholar, but also a politician, diplomat, courtier, musician and, not least, a bold and accomplished soldier, quick-tempered and sometimes recklessly frank. It was while serving as English ambassador in Paris that he published *On Truth* (1624), a shockingly sceptical philosophical essay. However, he was prudent enough not to openly question Christianity, and the more candid autobiography he wrote soon after remained unpublished while he lived. When civil war broke out in 1642 Herbert, now in his sixties, refused to take sides. Instead, he retired to work on what would become his last great book, *On Pagan Religion*, finished in 1645. He died three years later: the book remained unpublished until 1663.

Between them, the autobiography and *On Pagan Religion* show how Herbert earned his place in Kortholt's axis of atheism. From his boyhood onwards, Herbert tells us, 'a great number of doubts began to occur to me'. It is by now a familiar story. His particular stumbling block was the moral one. He could not reconcile the doctrine of Hell with his intuition that, if a sinner 'did not mean infinitely to offend . . . God will not inflict an infinite punishment upon him'. Likewise, he found Calvinist predestination impossible to believe, since it consisted of 'base and unworthy thoughts about the most gracious and good God'. Some would have fought back against the dreadful temptation of these thoughts. Herbert was more inclined to follow where they led him. While still a teenager, he tried to puzzle out the real truth of religion, making use of a favourite anti-atheist argument: that every human society had acknowledged gods. If that is so, he wondered, what characteristics are common to human religion in every age and every country? If the local oddities of each religion could be scraped away, perhaps he could reveal beneath them doctrines 'so universally taught that they were not questioned or doubted in any . . . religion'.[2] The treatise on pagan religion,

[2] Edward Herbert of Cherbury, *Pagan Religion: A Translation of* De religione gentilium, ed. John Anthony Butler (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996), 51–3; Edward Herbert of

then, was not merely a historical exercise. Herbert was sinking mineshafts to confirm that he had found bedrock.

His actual conclusions now seem rather bland. He became convinced that all religions taught that there is a God who deserves worship, who commands virtue and who both rewards and punishes humanity. These became the 'articles' of his faith. Herbert has been called the father of deism, but proper deists would have found all this disappointingly conventional. Two things gave it a dangerous edge. One, ironically, was Herbert's discretion. His own religious practice, he explained, was to hold to those core 'articles', but also, as best he could, to 'embrace and believe all that the Church in which I was born and brought up did uniformly teach'. Conforming to the Church of England was his duty as a patriotic Englishman. But since that church's doctrines went far beyond his 'articles', he believed its teachings 'either piously upon the Authority of the Church, or at least doubting piously when proofs were not sufficiently made and confirmed unto me'.[3]

This was Montaigne's fideism reworked for an unbeliever. Rather than simply submitting to the Church's authority, he left open the option of 'doubting piously': that is, conforming outwardly with inner mental reservation. Some unbelievers concealed their doubts cynically. Herbert had found a way of doing so on principle, and the principle was capable of quietly hollowing out whole churches. 'Doubting piously' perhaps makes him a truer ancestor of modern Anglicanism than his poet brother.

That dangerous conformity sat uneasily alongside Herbert's response to the obvious problem with his system. If those core 'articles' are humanity's universal religion, why is it that every actual human society has embellished them with so many other doctrines and

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Cherbury, *The Life of Edward, First Lord Herbert of Cherbury written by himself*, ed. J. M. Shuttleworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 25, 29.

[3] Herbert of Cherbury, *Life*, 30–1.

ceremonies? Herbert knew exactly who to blame for this: 'That race of clever priests who . . . thought that they could dazzle peoples' minds . . . [and] expected to get more profit and larger allowances for themselves from the various rites, ceremonies, and sacred mysteries which they invented.' In particular, he claimed, the controversial and divisive doctrines which had so often caused religious strife were created by priests in a deliberate attempt to stir up mutual hatreds and so to entrench their own power. Ancient pagan priesthoods had done it and, he believed, Christian priests did exactly the same. So Herbert's core articles of faith are universal principles, but religion, explicitly including Christianity, is a conspiracy.[4] Anxious doubts and moral outrage had joined forces. Herbert took the Machiavellian claim that religion is a political trick and dressed it in pious clothing. He was wise not to publish any of this in his lifetime.

Kortholt's second Englishman was less discreet. Thomas Hobbes was so notorious that 'he cannot walk the streets, but the Boys point at him saying, There goes Hobbes the Atheist!' It was probably not exactly true. Hobbes conformed outwardly to the Church of England for most of his life, and may even have attended its traditional worship in the 1650s, when it was illegal to do so. But his reported claim that he 'liked the religion of the church of England best of all other' sounds more like an aesthetic choice than a confession of faith. Perhaps he shared Herbert's ethic of 'doubting piously'. He certainly shared Herbert's dislike of priests. His reported comment to the clergy of various denominations who pestered him on his sickbed – 'Let me alone, or else I will detect all your cheats from Aaron [the founder of the Jewish priesthood] to yourselves' – could have come from Herbert. The sustained vitriol

[4] Herbert of Cherbury, *Pagan Religion*, 52, 285, 339, 350.

of the fourth and final section of his *Leviathan* (1651), an extended howl of rage against the Catholic clergy under the title 'The Kingdom of Darkness', makes Herbert look mild.[5]

Hobbes' reputation for atheism rested chiefly on *Leviathan*, and especially on the half of the book which is supposedly devoted to religion. His attack on biblical authority became notorious: no one had ever denied in print before that the Bible's first five books were written by Moses. But as ever, this was not about disinterested biblical scholarship.[6] Hobbes' two-pronged attack on both biblical and clerical authority has something Seekerish about it. His persistent theme throughout the religious passages of *Leviathan* is the impossibility of certain religious knowledge. No human claim about God – whether made by priests or by the Bible's human authors – is or can ever be beyond question, even if apparently authorised by miracles. Private individuals, including churchmen, may believe such claims, but they cannot force anyone else to agree. They can only persuade, as the first apostles did. Seekers used this sense of provisionality to argue that no religion was possible. Hobbes gave the argument a simple twist. He had spent the first half of his book arguing for the absolute sovereignty of secular governments. He now claimed that, since absolute religious truth is unknowable, secular governments' sphere of control ought to extend over religion too. He does not argue that they have some secret religious knowledge: merely that they are no more likely to be wrong than anyone else, and that no one can prove that they are wrong. He is particularly hostile to any notion of a separate spiritual authority. '*Temporal* and *spiritual* government, are but two words brought into the world, to make men see double, and mistake their lawful

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[5] Patricia Springborg, 'Hobbes on Religion' in Tom Sorell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 346–80; Alan Cromartie, 'The God of Thomas Hobbes', *Historical Journal* 51.4 (2008), 857–79.

[6] The same goes for the slightly earlier denial of Moses' authorship in Isaac la Peyrère's *Pre-Adamitae*, written in 1641 but not published until 1655: la Peyrère 'wanted to raise a basic kind of religious scepticism about Scripture in order to justify his own religious views', namely a weird doctrine of human polygenesis. Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 221–3.

sovereign.' A professedly Christian sovereign is 'the supreme pastor of his own subjects' as well as their ruler: not because God can be assumed to have put him in power, but because the mere fact of being in power bestows on itself religious as well as political authority. Hobbes does allow that 'belief and unbelief can never follow men's commands', but only in the most minimal sense. Governments cannot regulate beliefs, but they can absolutely regulate speech and outward action. If all other truths are provisional, political power is all that remains.[7]

Looked at through one eye, this is an anticlerical variant of Montaigne's fideism, or indeed a natural extension of the 'Anglican' position, associated with the Elizabethan theologian Richard Hooker, that monarchs in Parliament have authority not only over the bodies but the consciences of their subjects.[8] But through the other eye, it is the royalist caricature of Parliamentarian relativism – 'Is there a God? Let it be put to vote!'[9] – come to life, or else an attempt to turn Machiavellian cynicism into something praiseworthy. It is not merely that Hobbes believed that religious truth was fundamentally inaccessible, a view that the Seekers shared. What is truly shocking is that this did not trouble him. He had apparently left anxiety behind him. He does seem to have believed that there is a God – otherwise we have to dismiss an implausible amount of his writing as a smokescreen – but he was not especially interested in the question, except insofar as he was suspicious of anyone claiming to act in God's name. The deity he truly revered was political power, the Leviathan itself. The reputation for atheism that this won him was not unjust. But his ideas were easier to condemn than to refute.

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[7] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), esp. 306, 327, 357.

[8] Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Preface, Books I to IV*, ed. Georges Edelen (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977), esp. 32–3.

[9] See above, p. XX.

Herbert and Hobbes, important as they are, were mere supporting players to Kortholt's third impostor. If modern atheism has a single acknowledged intellectual founder, it is Baruch Spinoza. According to the foremost modern historian of Enlightenment radicalism, Jonathan Israel, 'no one else . . . remotely rivalled Spinoza's notoriety', and with good reason:

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> Spinoza's prime contribution to the evolution of early modern Naturalism, fatalism, and irreligion . . . was his ability to integrate within a single coherent or ostensibly coherent system, the chief elements of ancient, modern and oriental 'atheism'. No one else in early modern times did this, or anything comparable. . . . [He] fundamentally and decisively shaped a tradition of radical thinking which eventually spanned the whole continent.

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At first glance Spinoza seems to belong to a different story from the one this book has been telling: a Dutch Jewish philosopher whose journey towards radicalism began when he questioned his own community's orthodoxies in 1655, at the age of twenty-two. The following year he was expelled from the Amsterdam synagogue. These early clashes eventually bore fruit in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670), a devastating attack on the authority of the Bible, on any notion of the supernatural, on any attempt to override human reason and, in particular, on clerical authority or any kind of theocracy – a preoccupation he shared with Hobbes, although he was also very critical of Hobbes' political absolutism. Spinoza's claim that 'nature is self-moving, and creates itself' was not atheistic in the strict

sense – it is closer to pantheism – but his reputation as the founding father of modern unbelief is well deserved.[10]

For our story, Spinoza's significance lies in what happened after he was excommunicated in 1656: he fell in with Amsterdam's most intellectually open religious community, Adam Boreel's Collegiants. He did so at a moment of particular religious flux, when a pair of English Quaker missionaries had come to Amsterdam, and the Collegiants recognised the Quakers' 'inner light' as congruent with their own quasi-mystical commitment to 'reason'. The young Spinoza quickly became a part of this milieu. He collaborated with the Quaker missionary Samuel Fisher, working with him to translate an early Quaker pamphlet into Hebrew, in the (vain) hope of winning Jewish converts: it was Spinoza's first ever published work. In 1660, Fisher wrote a long, chaotic but incisive attack on biblical authority which anticipated many of Spinoza's later arguments: there is no knowing who learned what from whom, but plainly the two men were intellectually close. In 1658 another Quaker missionary wrote that Spinoza was 'very friendly' to their cause. The influence was not forgotten. Crucial chapters of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* borrowed from the Quaker Margaret Fell. But by then, Spinoza's friendship with the Quakers had fallen foul of a bitter rupture between the Quakers and the Collegiants. The root of the quarrel was not, as is still sometimes suggested, that Collegiant rationalism and Quaker mysticism were polar opposites, but that they were so nearly the same thing that their remaining differences were intolerable. Even so, Spinoza cleaved to his Collegiant friends, in particular to one Pieter Balling, who would translate Spinoza's first original book into Dutch. Spinoza remained personally close to Balling and to several other leading Collegiants throughout his life. When

[10] Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 159–60, 230; cf. the similarly pivotal role Spinoza plays in Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*, 147–52.

he moved out of Amsterdam in 1660–1, he chose as his rural refuge the village of Rijnsburg, the heartland of the Collegiant movement, founded there four decades earlier.[11]

Spinoza was never a Christian. But he was a Collegiant fellow-traveller: an affinity which would never have required him to contemplate anything so crassly carnal as a baptism. His early critique of both Christianity and Judaism was very much of a piece with the Collegiant, Seeker and Quaker critique of 'religion'. The philosophical heft he brought to the table was new, but the moral force behind it was not. A vital part of this is that, despite or perhaps because of his Jewish background, Spinoza had an extraordinarily positive view of Jesus, whom he called 'not so much the prophet as the mouthpiece of God'. He unproblematically used the momentous title *Christ* for him – no small step for a Jew to take – and repeatedly emphasised that Jesus' teaching and moral vision were so far above anyone else's that 'the voice of Christ may be called the voice of God'. For all his biblical scepticism, he was happy to accept the basic accuracy of the Christian Gospels. The main exception to that is his blanket rejection of miracle stories, but here, too, his reasoning was driven more by theology and ethics than by any quasi-scientific scepticism. The reason he believed that 'nature cannot be contravened' was because the alternative is 'to assert that God has created nature so weak . . . that he is repeatedly compelled to come afresh to her aid': miracles were theologically incoherent. In fact, because a miracle would be 'in contravention to God's nature and laws . . . belief in it would throw doubt upon everything, and lead to atheism'.[12] Any Collegiant or Seeker might have said the same.

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[11] Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*, 151–5, 193, 200, 203; Richard H. Popkin, 'Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam', *Quaker History* 73.1 (1984), 14–28; Karen Clausen-Brown, 'Spinoza's Translation of Margaret Fell and his Portrayal of Judaism in the Theological-Political Treatise', *The Seventeenth Century* 34.1 (2019), 89–106.

[12] Richard H. Popkin, 'Spinoza and Bible Scholarship' in James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (eds), *The Books of Nature and Scripture* (Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 15; Erdozain,

In 1662 Pieter Balling, Spinoza's translator and friend, published a remarkable little Dutch book titled *The Light upon the Candlestick*, translated into English the following year. Starting from the impossibility of finding religious certainty in any church or sect, Balling exhorted each reader instead 'to turn into the Light that's in him'. Like Dirck Volckerstz Coornhert, whom we met in chapter three, Balling deliberately avoided citing the Bible at any point in his text: he wanted Reason to stand unaided. At most, he allowed for the possibility that some readers might, by means of the light within them, recognise 'the Book called the BIBLE' as having 'an harmony with . . . God'. As to what this 'light' is, he stated breezily that 'it's all one to us whether ye call it Christ, the Spirit, the Word, etc.', but he makes clear that ultimately this 'light' is moral intuition. 'It is properly the nature of this Light infallibly to discover sin and evil.'[13]

The book has caused considerable confusion – Balling wrote it as an intervention in the hairsplitting Collegiant–Quaker dispute, but it is so close to Quakerism that it has often been mistaken for a Quaker text. Its real importance, however, is that this is the point where Seekerism and Spinozism met and meshed, and the Anglo-Dutch ferment of Protestant doubt and questioning that had been coming to a simmer for decades reached boiling point. The book allows for virtually nothing recognisable as Christianity, Judaism or even 'religion'. Yet the mystical rationalism that it advocates is driven, above all, by the strength of its moral vision. And even as it rejected every trace of 'religion' as the word was normally understood, the book's final words lambasted 'all fools that say in their heart there is no God'.[14]

The Soul of Doubt, 90, 97–9, 108, 112, 114; Baruch Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, ed. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), vol. I, 83–4, 87.

[13] [Pieter Balling], *The Light upon the Candlestick*, trans. Benjamin Furley (London: for Robert Wilson, 1663), 4–5, 10; Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*, 200–3.

[14] As this makes clear, Balling may not have cited the Bible, but he was ready enough to quote it unattributed: [Balling], *The Light upon the Candlestick*, 13.

<A>From Then to Now, I: Anger

And so the years around 1660 are when our main story ends: for this is when unbelief finally came out into the open and claimed philosophical respectability for itself. The intellectual history of atheism that follows from then until now is both important and fascinating, but we should not let it fool us. Behind and beneath it lies the deeper, emotional history we have been tracing. Its two streams now mingled and reinforced one another. On one side was the stream of anger: the unbelief of suspicion and defiance, refusing to be taken in or ordered around by priests and their God. That kind of unbelief was eyecatching, but it only became dangerous when it began to assert an ethical framework of its own. The Reformation, by choosing scepticism as its key religious weapon, in effect required believers to transition to a different kind of post-sceptical faith, a journey many of them struggled to complete. Protestants expected their faith to be settled and assured, but their intense self-reflectiveness sometimes made this desperately difficult to achieve. Hence the surge in the second emotional stream of unbelief: the stream of anxiety, in which earnestly pious men and women found themselves beset with fears and uncertainties which could not be reasoned away, because they were not in the end based on reason. Instead, some of these unwilling sceptics dealt with their anxieties in the classic Protestant way: by turning their doubts into a tool, and using it to dig down in the hope of rebuilding their faiths on a sound footing. As their anxieties dissolved one certainty after another, they were left with nothing except their commitment to their moral vision, which increasingly seemed not only to be Christianity's heart but also – as the Renaissance humanists had unwittingly implied – to be detachable from the Christian tradition itself. They turned that moral intuition against the tradition that had taught it to them, critiquing Christianity for its failure to embody the ethics of Jesus Christ. And so the two streams came together. The moral force of the unbelief of anger and

the moral urgency of the unbelief of anxiety mixed into a gathering flow of insistent, ethically driven doubts that began carving Christendom's old-established landscape into something new.

This is a Protestant-led story, but it could not be confined to the Protestant world. Catholics' and Protestants' existential struggle held them in lockstep with one another. For a sign of how the same currents were tugging on Catholicism, consider Blaise Pascal, whose complex, passionate Catholicism was aligned with the unorthodox, Calvinist-influenced movement known as Jansenism. We have already met his very particular perspective on the seventeenth century's anxieties about religious certainty. His treatise against atheism was never completed, and perhaps never could have been: the hundreds of fragments he prepared towards it were published under the bland title *Pensées* a few years after his death in 1662. A dominant theme of these 'thoughts' is the futility of argument. Philosophical proofs 'are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact', even if you could be sure of the reliability of your own logic. As to arguments for God from nature, he points out that the Bible never tries to make that case. Such 'proofs' may be edifying for believers, but telling actual atheists that God is self-evident in nature 'is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . Nothing is more likely to bring it into contempt in their eyes.' He is not claiming that nature proves there is *not* a God. It is worse than that: nature is ambiguous. It gives us 'too much to deny and not enough to affirm', so leaving us merely with 'doubt and anxiety'. For Pascal, those lost in this trackless desert should give up their doomed mirage-chasing, and wait for their only hope of escape: a divine guide.

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> We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart . . . Those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate . . .

but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reasoning, until God gives it by moving their heart, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation.

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There is no point, said the mathematical giant of his age, in relying on the 'mathematical mind'. For all its achievements that mind struggles reliably to discern truths. The 'intuitive mind' would have to serve instead.[15]

This counsel of despair mirrors his Protestant counterparts' conclusion: in the end, either you see God or you don't. Either way, reasoned arguments will not persuade you to change your mind. Whichever side of the divide you have landed on, you will construct arguments to defend your position, but you should not mistake those *post hoc* rationalisations for your true reasons. It was this impasse that sparked Pascal's most notorious theological gambit: his wager.

The wager had in fact already been around for at least a century, having first been popularised by the rationalist Protestant radical Faustus Socinus.[16] Its crude form warned atheists that they stood to gain nothing if they were right, but risked eternal damnation in Hell if they were wrong, and so urged them to believe out of raw self-interest. The problems with this crass argument were obvious, not least that it proposed a nakedly pragmatic 'faith' that hardly deserves the name. Pascal adapted it not to browbeat atheists, but as a thought-experiment for those paralysed by the impossibility of certainty. There may or may not be a God, he concedes.

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[15] Pascal, *Pensées*, 28–9, 57, 135, 151, 182, 237; and see above, pp. XX-XX.

[16] Shagan, *Birth of Modern Belief*, 190; cf. Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism in Early Modern England*, 74.

> But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager?

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Perhaps you would prefer not to gamble? Too late: once you are born, 'there is no choice, you are already committed'. But although the odds are utterly unknowable, the stakes are not, and so Pascal the mathematician can offer at least one kind of certainty. We are offered the chance to stake something temporary – our earthly lives – for something eternal. And even at vanishingly long odds, a rational gambler would risk any finite stake for a chance of an infinite reward.[17]

It is a clever, bloodless argument. Pascal does not expect anyone to be persuaded by it. Quite the opposite: he is very clear about the futility of such arguments. His point is that unbelievers may accept his logic, may even 'want to be cured of unbelief', but even so find that true faith is beyond their reach. In which case, the answer is evidently not 'multiplying proofs of God's existence' but recognising that 'if you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions'. The wager, then, is a call not to conversion, but to self-examination. It confronts unbelievers with the fact that even a logically watertight reason to believe would not change their minds. It proves that we are immune to proof. In the end, for believer and unbeliever alike, 'the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing'.[18]

Pascal framed the problem brilliantly. By its nature, he could not solve it. His contemporaries, and his successors down to the present, are compelled to wager on a coin toss, or set of dice rolls, which we cannot see and at whose odds we can scarcely guess. And

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[17] Pascal, *Pensées*, 122–3.

[18] Pascal, *Pensées*, 124–5, 127.

so, like any real gambler, we wager not with our heads but with our hearts and our guts. What alternative is there?

As a forest of explicitly anti-religious arguments springs up from the later seventeenth century onwards, it can sometimes be difficult to see the wood for the trees, let alone to trace the subterranean currents of emotion that continued to nourish them. Still, we have already seen enough to know where to look. Our two intermingled streams of unbelief, anger and anxiety, both continued to flow, merging into a persistent moral force. There are so many and varied unbelieving voices in the centuries between then and now that any selection at all risks distortion. All we can do in the remaining pages is to listen to a handful of those voices, telling old stories in new ways.

That unbelief remained angry is unmistakable. There was mockery, which since the Renaissance (and before) had been an invaluable means of sidestepping difficult questions. If you can make religion look ridiculous, you are saved the trouble of either proving it false or proving something else true, and you reserve the option of covering your tracks by claiming that you were only joking. And making religion look ridiculous is sometimes so easy that it is irresistible. Charles Blount, an English deist of the late seventeenth century, would eventually go on to write openly against Christianity, but he began with an anonymous work, *Anima Mundi* (1679), whose 'defence' of the immortality of the soul was deliberately framed to make it look absurd. A more mischievous and explosive joke was played by Johann Joachim Müller, grandson of a renowned Lutheran anti-atheist who, so rumour claimed, had once seen or perhaps even owned a copy of the mythical *Of the Three Impostors*. In 1688 young Müller was invited to take part in an academic debate by Johann Friedrich Mayer, an ultra-orthodox Lutheran pastor in Kiel whose own interest in *Of the Three Impostors* verged on the obsessive. It was too much to resist. In his presentation in Kiel, Müller electrified the audience by quoting from the notorious, imaginary book. On his departure, he left behind a

gift for Mayer: a copy of the manuscript for which the Christian world had been hunting for so long. Mayer believed it was authentic, and knowing how dangerous it was, kept it close. Copies only began to circulate widely after his death in 1712. Müller had of course concocted the whole thing, and eventually admitted as much. Still, it was more than just a throwaway prank. The book fits into a long-standing culture among German law students of writing absurdist spoofs, such as a notorious 'debate' nearly a century earlier about whether or not women were human. Those students had not seriously been denying women's humanity, any more than Müller was seriously denouncing Christ as an impostor. But you do not play jokes like that unless you think they are funny. At the least, you want your audience to laugh rather than to be outraged. Very likely you want them to wonder, if only for a moment, whether you are right.[19]

Spoofing religion has remained a constant theme of unbelief down to the present. The most famous example is probably still Voltaire's Dr Pangloss, whose 'metaphysico-theology-cosmolonigology' convinced him that the world is as perfect as could be, and even that his own syphilis was a price worth paying so that the world might have cochineal. The modern era's most compelling literary meditation on belief and unbelief, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, has a neat example of the genre, put into the mouth of the debauched father, Fyodor Karamazov, who admits blithely that he expects to be dragged down to Hell with hooks when he dies:

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> And then I think: hooks? Where do they get them? What are they made of? Iron? Where do they forge them? Have they got some kind of factory down there? You

[19] Martin Mulsow, *Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany, 1680–1720*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 79–82; Manfred P. Fleischer, '"Are Women Human?" The Debate of 1595 between Valens Acidalius and Simon Gediccus', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12.2 (1981), 107–20.

know, in the monastery the monks probably believe there's a ceiling in hell, for instance. Now me, I'm ready to believe in hell, only there shouldn't be any ceiling; that would be, as it were, more refined, more enlightened, more Lutheran.[20]

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Even in nineteenth-century Russia, 'Lutheran' could be a code word for 'half-atheist'. It is a straight line from here to the flowering of religious mockery in modern times, which has given us Alan Bennett's 'Take a Pew' in *Beyond the Fringe*, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, and the incomparable *Father Ted*: more merry absurdism and gentle ridicule than vicious satire, but containing occasional, unmistakable flashes of real anger.

As ever, the primary target of that anger is not God himself, but his earthly representatives. The anticlericalism which animated unbelievers from the Middle Ages to Herbert, Hobbes and Spinoza has remained an engine of atheism down to the present, and not everyone finds the subject funny. The 'infamous thing' which Voltaire's motto '*écrasez l'infâme*' demanded must be crushed was the deadening and sometimes deadly power of the clergy. The real problem with a tyrannical conception of God, he warned, was that it 'invites men to become tyrants' in his name. The same mood is even plainer in Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1794), the first anti-Christian bestseller, a book said to have triggered Bible-burning parties on both sides of the Atlantic. Paine's fury was directed not at God, but at churches, which he called

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human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit. ... I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman

[20] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Penguin, 2017), I.i.4.

Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

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That was not a metaphysical position; in fact, beneath it all, Paine's substantial religious views were surprisingly conventional. It was, as befits one of the heralds of the American revolution, a declaration of independence. And it is a sentiment we can imagine Christopher Marlowe expressing two hundred years earlier.[21]

Two notorious nineteenth-century examples tell the same story. Thomas Huxley is now best known as 'Darwin's bulldog', although the myth of his triumph over the hapless bishop of Oxford in a debate over evolution in 1860 has grown in the telling. Huxley was certainly more outspoken on religious matters than Charles Darwin himself, and famously coined the term 'agnostic' to describe the scientific unbelief he advocated. But he was also an odd, and very English, kind of unbeliever. The opposite of agnosticism, as he saw it, was not Christianity, theism or religion as such, but 'Ecclesiasticism, or . . . Clericalism'. He despised Bishop Wilberforce's title and his officiousness at least as much as his opinions. Remarkably, Huxley claimed to be defending 'the foundation of the Protestant Reformation', by which he meant the 'conviction of the supremacy of private judgement' – in contrast to the 'effete and idolatrous sacerdotalism' which he believed had overtaken the Church of England in his own age.[22] That was not at all what the first Protestant Reformers had thought they were doing, but Huxley did have a point. He was deploying the same merciless scepticism which the Reformers had weaponised and popularised, and against their traditional targets.

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[21] Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, 146; Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1974), 50.

[22] Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, 184–6.

Huxley's much less respectable contemporary Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist and revolutionary, had a very different perspective but strikingly similar concerns. His essay 'God and the State', written during the revolutionary false dawn of the Paris Commune in 1871, boils with rage at 'every religious system' ever invented. Their 'very nature and essence . . . is the impoverishment, enslavement and annihilation of humanity for the benefit of divinity'. And so his fury turned first of all to the slavemasters who had perpetrated this crime: 'Whoever says revelation says revealers, messiahs, prophets, priests and legislators inspired by God himself. . . . All men owe them passive and unlimited obedience; for . . . against the justice of God no terrestrial justice holds. Slaves of God, men must also be slaves of Church and State.'

One result was that Bakunin, like Huxley and Fyodor Karamazov, could not help but insert himself into the unending conflict between Catholic and Protestant. For him, the essence of religion was to enslave humanity to priests. So he concluded, with wonderfully circular logic: 'That is why Christianity is the absolute religion, the final religion; why the Apostolic and Roman Church is the only consistent, legitimate, and divine church.' Since Catholicism alone had truly embraced religion's tyrannical destiny, it was the only religion he saw as a worthy enemy. Protestants and theological liberals, 'honest but timid souls' whose God 'is a nebulous, illusory being that vanishes into nothing at the first attempt to grasp it', were beneath his contempt. Like a great many atheist (and anti-atheist) campaigners before and since, Bakunin anointed his most extreme and caricatured opponents as the only ones who needed to be taken seriously, thus avoiding any risk of engaging with people whose more subtle or inconvenient ideas might deviate from the scripts he had written for them.[23]

In all these cases, the charge was not that clergy were peddling foolish notions of an imaginary God. It was that they were using those notions in order to subjugate, exploit and

[23] Michael Bakunin, *God and the State*, ed. Paul Avrich (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 17–18, 24–5.

oppress the people. This was not about metaphysics; it was about wealth and power, and the critique was moral, not philosophical. It was in line with the traditional Protestant critique of clerical power, which Protestant radicals had quickly turned onto the new Protestant establishments. And its moral framework was straightforwardly Christian. These critics did not merely observe that churches oppress their people, or follow Machiavelli in seeing this as a shrewd and prudent tactic. They believed that for the strong and cunning to oppress the weak and simple is wrong.

If they did turn their anger from the clergy to God himself, they did so in the same vein. Paine's *The Age of Reason* did not attack the Bible chiefly by amassing textual and historical problems with it, but by declaring it morally unfit for purpose:

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> Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon than the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind.

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Like Richard Dawkins' pithy claim that 'the God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction', this works by measuring the Bible against an agreed moral standard and finding it wanting – that standard, certainly in Paine's case, being derived from the Christian tradition itself. As a self-confessed deist, Paine found the Bible blasphemous: it defamed God by portraying him as morally deficient. One of the most common stumbling blocks for Christian belief in modern times – the traditional doctrine of Hell – worked in the same way. It triggered a moral intuition that God simply could not consign a part of his creation to eternal torment. This intuition did not refute the formidable

logic of Augustinian or Calvinist theology: it bypassed it. The result has sometimes been materialism or some other mortalist doctrine, but equally often it has been forms of Christianity that reject Hell, or beliefs like spiritualism, which allows for immortality without Hell and which had a powerful appeal in the early twentieth century.[24]

Again, at the apogee of this moral anger, we find Bakunin. He recognised that the problem of the clergy could not be separated from the problem of God. If they really were God's representatives, then they truly would be entitled to enslave humanity. Some writers would have sidestepped at this point into some logical argument that there is no God, but Bakunin recognised that this would be dishonest, and confronted the issue head on:

<Q>

> If God existed, only in one way could he serve human liberty – by ceasing to exist . . . I reverse the phrase of Voltaire, and say that, *if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him*.

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On the surface, this is ridiculous: a fulfilment of all the accusations that atheism is a form of wishful thinking. Bakunin's syllogism – 'If God is, man is a slave; now, man can and must be free; then, God does not exist' – absurdly derives a metaphysical claim from a political opinion. He is a new Canute, not merely ordering the tide to turn but the entire sea to dry up.[25] But on a deeper level, this is good moral theology. God is by definition good. But the existence of a God is (Bakunin believes) inherently oppressive and therefore evil. Therefore the very concept of God is self-contradictory. If you accept his premisses, the case is watertight. Once again, however, among those premisses is a very particular moral

[24] Paine, *Age of Reason*, 60; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld, 2016), 51; Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848–1914* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 162.

[25] Bakunin, *God and the State*, 25, 28.

framework, which presumes liberty is an absolute good and subjugation an absolute evil. How far that framework is itself of Christian origin is not especially important. The point is that this is how the atheism of anger works. It is only when its *moral* standards come into conflict with God that God has to be abolished.

<A>From Then to Now, II: Anxiety

Alongside, and intertwined with, the unbelief of anger remains the unbelief of anxiety. The seventeenth century's agonised Puritan wrestlers with doubt have had countless successors: individuals who have not embraced the fierce certainties of dogmatic faith or of angry unbelief, who are not so much sitting on the fence as impaled on it. Sometimes these agonies have been resolved into more or less settled belief, or unbelief; sometimes doubters have withdrawn, exhausted, from the fray, and made some sort of peace with their uncertainties; sometimes those uncertainties have not been resolved at all. Many of these dramas are documented in a distinctively modern literary form, uniquely well suited to exploring characters' inner turmoil: the novel. Religious anxieties burn through novels such as James Hogg's astonishing *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), the works of George Eliot, or, again, Dostoevsky. The mother in *The Brothers Karamazov* who cannot control her doubts about immortality could have been airlifted directly to nineteenth-century Russia from seventeenth-century England:

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> I think, all my life I've believed, and then I die, and suddenly there's nothing . . . What, what will give me back my faith? . . . How can it be proved, how can one be

convinced? Oh, miserable me! . . . I'm the only one who can't bear it. It's devastating, devastating![26]

</Q>

Some achieve unbelief. Some have it thrust upon them.

But as we saw in Chapter 5, those who suffer these agonies are not merely passive. Very often they try to defend or refound their faith, holding on to its core while relinquishing what seems unnecessary or indefensible. This can make it difficult to distinguish between religion's defenders and its adversaries. Spinoza is not the only iconic figure in the history of unbelief who was, at least in his own terms, a believer. Dominic Erdozain's compelling history of anti-Christian thought argues that a whole series of these philosophers were in fact trying to purify Christianity, not to destroy it. Pierre Bayle, the French Enlightenment's first great apostle of liberalism, scourge of attempts to use religion as a tool of social order, was trying to redeem Christianity from cruel distortions, not an atheist prudently maintaining a sham, residual faith. Voltaire echoed Spinoza by rejecting miracles on the grounds that 'the universal theologian, that is, the true philosopher, sees that it is contradictory for nature to act on particular or single views': that is a religious, not an atheistic conviction. Paine wrote his fierce critique of Christianity in *The Age of Reason* 'lest in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity and of the theology that is true'.[27]

These thinkers had not rejected Christianity, nor were they unwilling to deal in its currency. They were, however, persuaded that that currency was devalued, and that the guarantees of the churches that claimed to stand behind it might no longer be sound. And as any banker knows, anxieties of that kind are intolerable, whether well founded or not. Rather

[26] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, I.ii.4.

[27] Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, esp. 130–1, 155; Paine, *Age of Reason*, 50.

than trying to shore up faith in those old guarantors, these speculators attempted a bolder gambit: to rebase their religious currency entirely, founding it on the gold standard of natural law and morality rather than the churches' dubious claims to authority. They believed that in doing so they were going back to Christianity's true heart.

Yet some of the results of this rebasing did not look very much like traditional Christianity. The Enlightenment era's single most important philosopher, Immanuel Kant, was a convinced adherent of the new gold standard. His 'categorical imperative', which codified it, still underpins what much of the modern world thinks is self-evident moral common sense. Kant believed himself to be defending God, but where Montaigne had confined his God to an honoured and secluded cloister, 'Kant built a fortress of conscience . . . that swore a rescued God to silence.' In this system, as Erdozain puts it, 'morality has swallowed religion'. Even Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), one of the age's bitterest moral critiques of religion in any form, belongs in the same tradition. By this stage, the battle for credulity has finally been lost and Christianity has eaten itself.[28]

The culmination of this tradition is in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov,* when the idealistic Ivan lays out his very distinctive form of unbelief. At first glance it looks like the classic argument from suffering: God could not permit suffering, but suffering exists, therefore there is no God. But this is not Ivan Karamazov's argument. He does not deny God. He even accepts that in the end a higher good may come of suffering. His problem is simply that his moral intuition gags at the very idea:

<Q>

> If the suffering of children goes to make up the sum of suffering needed to buy truth, then I assert beforehand that the whole of truth is not worth such a price. . . . Imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making

[28] Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, esp. 120, 228.

people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears – would you agree to be the architect on such conditions?

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This is not unbelief; it is defiance. His brother Alyosha murmurs that it is 'rebellion'. Ivan himself says, 'It is not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket.' He finds the universe ethically unacceptable. The God who made it this way is real enough, but Ivan wants nothing to do with him.[29]

And yet, the gold standard against which Ivan Karamazov and all these other moralists were measuring their religion was Christian. Ivan himself could not have made it plainer. Having declared his wish to return his ticket, he launches into his parable of the Grand Inquisitor, in which a (Catholic) inquisitor, who we are explicitly told does not believe in God, berates an incognito Jesus at great length for the foolish impracticality of his morals before condemning him to die. Jesus remains silent throughout, but at the end 'approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him. . . . That is the whole answer.'[30] Ivan is not clinging to Jesus' moral authority while rejecting churches and doctrines. He is rejecting churches and doctrines because of, and by means of, Jesus' moral authority.

Dostoevsky may have given us the most memorable image of this clash between Jesus and religion, but as Erdozain points out, it was hardly original to him. Spinoza set a trend: unbelievers singling Jesus out for praise. Voltaire, especially later in life, treated Jesus with uncharacteristic reverence, as an archetype of true natural religion. Thomas Jefferson claimed to follow what he called 'the Philosophy of Jesus', saying that Jesus would not recognise a

[29] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, II.v. 4.

[30] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, II.v. 5.

single feature of the so-called Christianity erected in his name. Thomas Paine believed not only that 'the morality [Jesus] preached and practised was of the most benevolent kind', but that 'it has not been exceeded by any'. These sceptics may not revere him as the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, but they plainly see him as unique. John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth-century liberal whose atheism was undoubted, believed that 'the authentic sayings of Jesus of Nazareth' were not merely in 'harmony with the intellect and feelings of every good man or woman', but almost constituted true humanity: 'That they should be forgotten, or cease to be operative on the human conscience, while human beings remain cultivated or civilized, may be pronounced, once for all, impossible.'[31]

Perhaps some of these sentiments were insincere. If so, they were bowing to a cultural fact: for believers and unbelievers alike, Jesus Christ was by far the most potent moral figure in Western culture. Respectable radicals might question his divinity, but only a scoundrel like Nietzsche would question his morality. One raw index of this cultural power was the English fashion for literary 'lives' of Jesus started by John Seeley's *Ecce Homo* (1865) and bolstered by a new wave of questions about the Bible's reliability. Over the next forty years a staggering five thousand such 'lives' were published.[32] If the late Victorian age was losing faith in Christianity, as plenty of Christians feared, it was certainly not losing interest in Christ.

One odd, backhanded testimony to Jesus' cultural power is the persistence among a certain combative strain of atheism of a very odd belief: that Jesus of Nazareth never existed. Historically speaking, this claim is not impossible, but it is pretty implausible: in effect, it

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[31] Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, 163; https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0216; Paine, *Age of Reason*, 54; John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, ed. Lou Matz (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009), 123.

[32] Gerald Parsons, 'Biblical Criticism in Victorian Britain: From Controversy to Acceptance?' in his *Religion in Victorian Britain vol. II: Controversies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 245–55.

requires the existence of a large-scale, entirely successful and oddly pointless conspiracy in the first century. But it is not and never has been intended as a sober historical claim. Napoleon, who is recorded as denying Jesus' existence on several occasions, was not a scholar of ancient history. He simply had one of modern history's most colossal egos, and resented kowtowing to the moral authority of a dead Galilean peasant. The case was made more substantially by Karl Marx's scholarly mentor Bruno Bauer, perhaps the most serious historian ever to deny Jesus' existence. Bauer took this stance because it fitted with his long-standing anti-Christian views, and also with his anti-Semitism, which balked at accepting a Jewish prophet's position at the heart of western civilisation. A simpler, although equally implausible solution to that particular problem was adopted by Adolf Hitler, who said in private conversation that 'it's certain that Jesus was not a Jew' and in fact that 'Jesus fought against the materialism of his age, and, therefore, against the Jews.'[33]

In our own times, Jesus-denialism has found a more harmless home on the fringes of atheist subcultures. Books such as Kenneth Humphreys' *Jesus Never Existed* (2005) or Joseph Atwill's *Caesar's Messiah* (2005) are openly anti-religious polemics or simple contrarianism rather than sober historical studies.[34] What makes the determined pursuit of this argument interesting is that it is not only implausible: it is unnecessary. Denials of Christianity do not become weaker if you admit that Jesus of Nazareth existed, any more than denials of life on Mars become weaker if you admit that Mars exists. This fringe are following Napoleon by recognising that Christianity's cultural power depends less on philosophical or theological claims than on Jesus' moral authority. Atheism's more level-headed advocates in recent times have preferred to avoid engaging with Jesus at all. An

[33] *Hitler's Table Talk 1941–1944*, trans. Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), 76, 721.

[34] For the tenor of this argument, Humphreys' website, http://www.jesusneverexisted.com/, is instructive.

unusual exception is the novelist Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), an engaging fictionalised separation of the good, ethical Jesus from his bad, religious alter ego. Spinoza would have recognised the distinction. Even in our own times, it seems, the authority of Jesus of Nazareth remains a force to be reckoned with. Rather than critiquing or relativising his morals, Christianity's opponents generally feel obliged to avoid him, to co-opt him by claiming his ethical mantle, or in extremis, to abolish him.

<A>From Jesus to Hitler

The wrestling match between belief and unbelief in the Western world has been a long one. Both parties have made numerous premature declarations of victory or defeat, but the struggle has repeatedly proved unpredictable. There is no knowing how things will turn next. Even so, since the mid-twentieth century, something has changed in Europe and North America. 'Religion', said an authoritative commentator on the United States in 1955, 'has become part of the ethos of American life to such a degree that overt anti-religion is all but inconceivable.' Western society was certainly very secular, as Christian commentators lamented, but Christianity continued to define its moral frameworks. And so virtually everyone continued to claim a residual identity as a Christian, apart from the few who had ancestral ties to Judaism or another religion. In the last half-century, that default, universal religious identity has broken down. For the first time, substantial and fast-growing minorities who deny that they have any religion at all have appeared/ Even in the overtly pious United States, this is true of over a third of adults born since 1980.[35] The minority of earnest and devout Christians may or may not be shrinking – the picture varies from place to place, and

[35] Will Herberg, *Protestant – Catholic – Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 276; Michael Sherman, 'The Number of Americans with No Religious Affiliation Is Rising', *Scientific American* (2018): https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-number-of-americans-with-no-religious-affiliation-is-rising/; and see above, p. XX.

certainly in the United States this group remains large and assertive – but the mass of nominal believers who have formed the majority in most 'Christian' societies for over a century seem rapidly to be shedding their skin. The change is above all a generational one. It seems increasingly plain that the 1960s – or the 'long 1960s' from around 1955 to 1975 – were an inflection point, when a new kind of secularism appeared in western culture.[36] Why?

This book's perspective suggests some answers. For a start, it is worth noticing what has *not* caused this secular surge. Angry unbelief has repeatedly over the past few centuries tried to confront or suppress religion, without much success. The first avowedly anti-Christian movement of modern times, during the wild days of the first French Revolution, served simply to stoke some of the Revolution's staunchest opposition. In the end Napoleon came to terms with the church whose founder he claimed never existed. Twentieth-century Communists' official atheism had, at best, a mixed record of success. Most (not all) Communist regimes permitted some religious practice, hoping that religion would wither under the force of propaganda and discrimination so that it did not have to be forcibly uprooted. However, both legal and illegal religious movements often flourished under Communism and have returned to a prominent socio-political role in a number of post-Communist societies. Even in open societies, campaigning, strident atheism has been no more obviously successful than campaigning, strident movements for religious renewal. In 1925, a group of combative New York atheists founded the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, with the aim of mounting a 'direct frontal assault' on religion. It generated a good deal of excitement and a number of local chapters, but the 'assault' did not result in any kind of breakthrough. Within a decade it had ceased to function. Like the so-called 'village atheists' whose mulish nonconformity outraged nineteenth-century America;

[36] Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001).

like the rakish 'Hellfire Clubs' which so offended moralists in eighteenth-century England; like the libertines who supposedly thronged sixteenth-century Paris; and like the steady stream of blasphemers who passed through medieval church courts, these people were shocking but not threatening. They were a part of the moral equilibrium of a Christian society.[37] Christianity has endured a good many 'direct frontal assaults' in the past few centuries. They have not proved very effective. If anything, the period since the 1950s has been distinguished by the *absence* of substantial, coordinated anti-religious campaigns. The example of the so-called 'New Atheist' movement spearheaded by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and their fellow 'horsemen' in the 2000s suggests that, even now, such campaigns are much better at cheering up atheists than at persuading believers.

Nor does the post-1960s secular turn reflect a contemporaneous collapse in the intellectual case for religion. The 'New Atheists' and most of their fellow-travellers are happy to present themselves as heirs to the Enlightenment critique of religion, or of the nineteenth century's set-piece debates about science. Not much about this case is substantially new, aside from a psychological and neurological dimension. If anything, the humanist-materialist argument against Christianity has weakened over the past century. At the turn of the twentieth century, an educated lay person in Europe or North America might have been expected to believe that the universe is infinitely old and entirely deterministic; that humanity's 'races' are fundamentally different from one another; that the process of evolution is governed by some sort of progressive life force; that the New Testament is a collection of myths created some centuries after the events it claims to describe, and the Old Testament a mere collage of stories shared by peoples across the entire ancient Near East. All those beliefs are inimical to traditional Christianity, and a century on, none of them have

[37] Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), esp. 249, 253.

stood the test of time.[38] If Christianity has disintegrated intellectually, it happened a long time ago, not during the 1960s.

So if religion has neither collapsed nor been crushed, what has been happening to it? Historians of the 1960s describe a series of tectonic social changes, from the decline of collective identities in increasingly individualistic societies, to the momentous changes in gender roles and in sexual mores that accompanied second-wave feminism, the contraceptive pill and the rise of women's paid employment. However, the most recent study by one of the most trenchant of these historians goes further. Callum Brown's remarkable book *Becoming Atheist* is an oral history of modern unbelief, based on interviews with eighty-five adult atheists across Europe and North America. It is impossible to read his account and deny that religiosity in the Western world has undergone an epochal shift during his interviewees' lifetimes.

Brown's people and their stories are enormously varied, but he observes that they share a remarkably consistent *ethical* code. That code has two key elements. First is the so-called 'golden rule' of treating others as you would like to be treated – a Christian imperative, but not, as Brown points out, an exclusively Christian one. Then there is a linked set of principles about human equality and bodily and sexual autonomy. Brown calls this ethical framework 'humanism', a term which relatively few of his interviewees volunteered, but which all of them were happy to embrace when offered the chance.[39]

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> What makes this interesting is that Brown's interviewees claimed without exception, that they were 'humanists' before they discovered the term. Humanism was neither a philosophy nor an ideology that they had learned or read

[38] Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Radicals who Made the Modern World* (London: William Collins, 2017), 264.

[39] Callum Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 171–2.

about and then adopted. There was no act of conversion, no training or induction . . . A humanist condition precedes being a self-conscious humanist.[40]

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This 'humanism' was not a manifesto they had embraced, much less a programme imposed on them. Those of them who had grown up in religious settings had embraced this ethic before they broke with their religion. When the breaking point did come, it was either because of a conflict between their religious and their humanist ethics, or because their humanist ethics made their religion appear redundant. The implication is that, in the West since the mid-twentieth century, growing numbers of earnestly or nominally religious people have adopted an ethic which is independent of their religion, and is in some tension with it: so they have either drifted away from or consciously rejected their religion. This account, with ethics as its driving force, meshes with the story we have been tracing since the seventeenth century.

So where did this diffuse, ubiquitous ethic come from? If Brown's humanists did not even consciously adopt their ethics, how did they reach such a consistently shared position? Brown – a proud humanist himself – suggests that it may arise from 'within human experience', indeed that 'reason alone may construct humanism': an echo of the old argument for God from universal human consensus. It is an appealing idea, but it is demonstrably false. Modern humanism is, perhaps unfortunately, in no sense an expression of universal human values. Its ethical markers – gender and racial equality, sexual freedom, a strong doctrine of individual human rights, a sharp distinction between the human and non-human realms – are, in a long historical perspective, very unusual indeed. Nor do they stand on a very firm logical base, as anyone who has ever tried philosophically to prove the existence of human rights

[40] Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 162.

knows. The fact that those values appear intuitively obvious to Brown, and indeed to me, is not an answer. It is the problem.[41]

Brown does, however, observe that the dominance of these values in Western culture can be dated to 1945, and in particular to 'the notion of human rights which emerged from the Second World War'.[42] As well as being the most catastrophic war in human history, the Second World War and in particular the Nazi genocide was the defining moral event of our age, which reset our culture's notions of good and evil. By the early twentieth century, Christianity's only undisputed role in Western society, its *raison d'être*, was to define morality. This is precisely what it failed to do in the Second World War, the modern era's most intense moral test. It failed not only in the sense that many churches and Christians were to a degree complicit with Nazism and fascism, but in the wider sense that the global crisis revealed that Christianity's moral priorities were wrong. It now seemed plain that cruelty, discrimination and murder were evil in a way that fornication, blasphemy and impiety were not.

As the post-war generations digested these lessons, they turned the war into the Western world's foundation myth. Cultural conservatives sometimes worry that modern Western societies lack shared sacred narratives, but this is not exactly true. In the same way that Victorian publishers endlessly retold the life of Jesus, post-war films, novels and other media endlessly retold and retell the Second World War. It is the story to which we continually return. Its history retains an unparalleled grip on our imagination because it is our *Paradise Lost*: our age's defining battle with evil.

Once the most potent moral figure in Western culture was Jesus Christ. Believer or unbeliever, you took your ethical bearings from him, or professed to. To question his morals

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[41] Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 174.

[42] Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 162, 168.

was to expose yourself as a monster. Now, the most potent moral figure in Western culture is Adolf Hitler. It is as monstrous to praise him as it would once have been to disparage Jesus. He has become the fixed reference point by which we define evil. The humanist ethic which Brown summarises is almost a precisely inverted image of Nazism. In the seventeenth century, arguments tended to end with someone calling someone else 'atheist', marking the point at which the discussion hit a brick wall. In our own times, as Godwin's Law notes, the final, absolute and conversation-ending insult is to call someone a Nazi. This is neither an accident nor a marker of mental laziness. It reflects that fact that Nazism, almost alone in our relativistic culture, is an absolute standard: a point where argument ends, because whether it is good or evil is not up for debate. Or again, while Christian imagery, crosses and crucifixes have lost much of their potency in our culture, there is no visual image which now packs as visceral an emotional punch as a swastika.

The plainest evidence that Nazism has crossed the barrier separating historical events from timeless truths is the way it has permeated the modern age's most popular myths. To many people it is incongruous, even embarrassing, that the twentieth century's bestselling work of fiction is an excessively long, unapologetically archaic and sometimes self-indulgent fairy tale written by a philologist who was a very traditional Catholic, and whose most devoted readers were and remain teenage boys. But even if you share the now-receding literary disdain for J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, there is no gainsaying its cultural importance. Tolkien himself had no patience for allegory as a literary form, and vigorously denied that he had written one, but if the War of the Ring does not mirror the Second World War which was raging as he wrote the book, it certainly refracts it, and he privately admitted as much. Tolkien was an early and staunch opponent of Nazism in general and Nazi racial ideology in particular, in part because he felt the Nazi appropriation of his beloved Nordic mythology as a personal affront. But while he never doubted the righteousness of the Allies'

cause, he was also a veteran of the Battle of the Somme, and knew that this war was, like any war, 'an ultimately evil job': so he told his son in 1944. And he used his own developing myth to explain what he meant: not only that there were 'a great many Orcs on our side', but that 'we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring'. Such a war might end in victory, but a victory whose effect would be 'to breed new Saurons'.[43]

Whatever we make of that as a political judgement, as a cultural prophecy it has proved uncannily prescient. Western culture has been breeding new Saurons ever since. The figure of the Dark Lord has stalked through the most persistent and popular mythologies of the post-war era, from *Star Wars*' Darth Vader to Harry Potter's Lord Voldemort. The debt these ersatz Hitlers owe to their real-world archetype is sometimes implied, sometimes openly acknowledged, but always plain. These are the myths on which generations of children in the post-Christian West have been raised, transposing the brutal lesson of the Second World War into timeless morality tales. It is a lesson our culture seems determined to teach itself and eager repeatedly to relearn: that this is what true evil looks like, even though in reality evil rarely appears in such unambiguous dress. And while the Christian ethical sensibility which Tolkien embodied still underpins these myths, they have, like the culture in which they have thrived, left that original taproot behind them.

And this is where the emotional history of unbelief currently stands in what used to be Christendom. Perhaps we still believe that God is good, but we believe with more fervour and conviction that Nazism is evil. In post-war humanism, the centuries-old Christian moral revolt against Christianity has finally kicked over the traces and renounced its residual connection to Christian ethics. Or at least, it has tried to. Since this humanism has emerged by processes of intuition rather than of conscious reasoning – since its history is, inevitably, an emotional history – it cannot rid itself of its ancestry quite so easily. It has become almost

[43] *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 78.

commonplace to point out that 'secular thought is mostly composed of repressed religion' and that humanism continues to be shaped by Christian moral norms. Combative atheists deplore this and opportunistic Christians celebrate it, but they are agreed about the fact.[44] It could hardly be otherwise. In this sense, the old struggle between belief and unbelief is not over. It has simply entered a new phase.

Still, a new phase it is. Breaking our moral currency's last links to the old gold standard of Christian ethics is unprecedented. Perhaps gold standards are in the end no more rational than any other coin, but underwriting our moral currency with the anti-Nazi narrative instead of with Christianity is an experiment. It is not clear how well or how long that narrative will be able to bear the burden it has been asked to carry. If we are going to choose a historical reference point for absolute evil, then Nazism is certainly hard to beat; but as the Second World War falls off the edge of living memory, will the old stories and convictions retain their power? Are moral myths we have distilled from them, heady as they are, capable of nourishing an enduring ethical sensibility? Will the lessons we have learned from them continue to seem intuitively and self-evidently true? The stirrings of authoritarian nationalism around the world suggest not. The readiness of some of those nationalists to claim pop-culture myths for themselves – Tolkien's mythology is all too open to racial categories which are, literally, dehumanising[45] – is a warning that emotive myth-making is a game all sides can play. If the common coin of our shared morals comes into increasing question, with contested histories and myths being reduced to scraps of paper, we will have little to underpin our collective ethics on except intuition – unless another shared experience, with luck one less

[44] Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism*, esp. 72; Theo Hobson, *God Created Humanism: The Christian Basis of Secular Values* (London: SPCK, 2017).

[45] Dmitra Fini, *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 131–59.

terrible than the Second World War, provides renewed values against which our currency can be rebased.

Two things at least are clear. First, Western Christendom is not about to snap back into place. The contemporary humanist surge is not a blip or an anomaly, but a continuation of moral forces that have been at work within the Christian world for centuries. Believers hoping it will go away and normal service will be resumed are deluding themselves. Indeed, they are in some danger of being tempted by authoritarian nationalist voices that want to unlearn the Second World War's moral lessons. When such voices say 'Christian', they mean a tribal identity rather than a universal ethic. That is not merely repugnant. It is self-defeating. Western culture sloughed off this kind of seductive, compromised religion for a reason, and would if necessary probably do so again. In the meantime, religions that dig their heels in to oppose the new moral environment risk taking on the role of medieval blasphemers: to validate a majority culture by offering it exactly the kind of predictable opposition it craves. The religions that will prosper in this environment will be those that work with the grain of humanist ethics, while finding ways to offer something that humanism cannot.

Second, the humanist surge is not a stable new reality either. The intuitions which make it possible will not flow peacefully, steadily and indefinitely. Our cultures' moral frameworks have shifted before and they will do so again. Our beliefs will, inevitably, follow. Believers and unbelievers alike share an interest in how that story ends.